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### First record of the Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex* in Malawi

On 7 February 1988 one of us (MR) observed a Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex* standing on the track next to a dam near Chelinda (10°35'S, 33°48'E), Nyika National Park, at an altitude of about 2200 m. It was a dull, cloudy morning with slight drizzle, following days of rain, but the bird was clearly seen, between 06:20 and 06:45, from a distance of 10 m, despite the poor light. The record has been accepted by the Malawi Rareties Committee.

The immediate impression was of a large (about 1 m high), dark grey stork with black wing tips. As it was wet, it may have appeared darker than it in fact was. It had a broad head and a short, thick neck which was held hunched between the shoulders, but its most striking character was the bill. This was horn-coloured, fairly short and extremely broad, being about two-thirds as wide as it was long, with a ridge running down the centre from the forehead to the hooked tip. The legs were long and thin, with prominent 'knee' joints and were dark coloured, although with a possible pink tinge.

After standing stationary for 20 min, the bird stretched its neck, moved slowly to the bank at the side of the road and nuzzled the grass, whereupon the observer departed. No photographs were taken since, the weather being what it was, the camera had been left at home.

That the first definite record of a Shoebill in Malawi should come from the Nyika Plateau is somewhat strange, since the habitat there is hardly suitable for the species. However, there have been previous and later sightings of possible or probably Shoebills in Liwonde National Park (c. 14°50'S, 34°20'E), where the dense reed and papyrus marshes round Lake Malombe and along the edge of the Shire River constitute ideal habitat.

In September 1987 an observer obtained a fleeting glimpse of a possible Shoebill in

thick papyrus swamp about 2 km upstream of the Kamuzu Barrage (which is in the town of Liwonde) and Robert Nyirenda, a game scout working in Liwonde National Park, has sent in a report concerning three separate sightings of a Shoebill in the Park, in December 1987 and in January and March 1988. This report is now being considered by the Rarities Committee in Malawi, but the probability that Shoebills have occurred there is great, especially as (according to Mr Nyirenda) the species is known to Malawians living in the area by the names of *Kokote* (Chichewa) and *Kongo-mupale* (Yao).

Shoebills occur in north-eastern Zambia, in south-eastern Zaïre (Maclean 1984) and in various swamps in western Tanzania (Britton 1980). The nearest Tanzanian swamp to Malawi is Lake Rukwa and a line drawn from there to Liwonde passes very close to the Nyika Plateau, but birds flying from any of the other swamps in Tanzania, Zaïre or Zambia would also pass close to the Nyika. The Shoebill soars to great heights (Maclean 1984) and considering that for several days prior to the Nyika sighting there had been low cloud and heavy rain, it seems quite possible that a Shoebill flying to or from the Shire River near Liwonde could have been blown off course and been caused to land on the plateau due to poor visibility. That the bird was not seen after the weather had cleared up, suggests that it departed as soon as conditions were favourable.

This first record is self-evidently that of a vagrant bird, but it seems likely that in the large areas of dense swamp in Liwonde National Park the species does occasionally occur; perhaps more frequently than the few apparent sightings suggest.

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## First record of the Rufous Bush Chat *Cercotrichas galactotes* in Malawi

On 13 December 1987 a Rufous Bush Chat *Cercotrichas galactotes* was netted at Nchalo, Malawi (16°16S, 34°55E) in an area of semi-arid bush and grassland at an altitude of 60 m. The subspecies was not determined, because of the very worn state of the plumage, but it was either *familiaris* or *syriacus*, most probably the former (Dr D.J. Pearson *in litt.*, who also considers that it was a first year bird, on account of its pale-edged wing coverts and flight feathers). The description was assessed by referees in Kenya who are familiar with the species and the record has been accepted by the Rarities Committee in Malawi.

The occurrence of this Middle Eastern migrant in southern Malawi was entirely unexpected. It normally winters in arid bush and grassland in Somalia (see, e.g., Pearson 1989) and northern and eastern Kenya and the furthest south that it has been recorded previously was in the extreme north-east of Tanzania (Britton 1980). However, weather